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Subject: Fw: Houston Chronicle - Fiery faucet is a symbol of division

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Fiery faucet is a symbol of division

Ruben Casso to: Rob Lawrence 04/19/2010 08:36 AM

Fiery faucet is a symbol of division

By LOREN STEFFY

April 18, 2010, 8:37PM

A man opens his faucet, holds a lighter under it, and the stream of water erupts in a fireball.

The dramatic footage is included in a promo for the documentary *Gasland,* which then asks, Do you know what natural gas drilling is doing to your water?

As drilling for natural gas in shale formations has expanded, so have concerns that the process may contaminate groundwater. Congress has held hearings, and new regulations have been proposed.

It's a fundraising dream for environmental groups big, bad oil companies drilling in people's backyards, public health concerns and flaming tap water.

It's been an easy issue for the environmental community to demagogue, said Jason Hutt, an attorney with Bracewell & Guiliani in Washington who specializes in environmental risk.

Natural gas drilling ought to offer a rare chance for environmentalists and the energy industry to find common ground. Natural gas, after all, is a cleaner-burning fuel, yet one that's economically viable unlike, say, wind power. Instead, as drilling has intensified, environmental groups have stepped up opposition.

As usual, the oil industry isn't doing itself any favors. Shale gas is taking the industry into more populated areas, from suburban Fort Worth to the northeastern U.S. Homeowners, already uncomfortable with the idea of nearby wells, are increasingly suspicious of what companies are doing.

To make matters worse, service companies have fought to keep secret the chemicals they mix with water and sand to inject into the well bore. The companies claim the mixtures are proprietary. Revealing the content without sharing the specific recipes, though, would go a long way toward easing public concern.

Last week, Exxon Mobil Corp. called for more disclosure of fluid contents.

Despite the concerns, groundwater contamination from hydraulic fracturing, the process used to extract gas from deep shale deposits, is rare when proper drilling practices are followed.

The process of fracking has been used for decades, and a 2005 study by the Interstate Oil and Gas Compact Commission found no instances of groundwater contamination in more than 1 million fracking operations that had been conducted by that time. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and state regulators have studied the issue as well, with similar results.

I don't think there's been any documented cases of contaminated freshwater zones from shale, said Nick Steinsberger, a Fort Worth-based consultant who has worked for Mitchell Energy and Devon and overseen the drilling of more than 1,000 shale wells.

The reason, he said, is basic geology. Most water aquifers aren't much deeper than 1,000 feet below the surface. Yet shale gas deposits are drilled to depths of 7,000 feet or more. Under existing environmental rules, the well bore must be encased with steel pipe and cement as it passes through the water table to prevent any gas from escaping, Steinsberger said.

There, have, however, been cases of water contamination from defective casings. Last week, Houston-based Cabot Oil & Gas was ordered to shut down three wells in Pennsylvania because it failed to comply with orders to fix bad well casings that led to drinking water contamination.

In a statement, Cabot said it agreed to a $240,000 fine and will pay $30,000 a month until it brings the wells into compliance, scheduled for November. It also will provide drinkable water to the affected homes.

If the well is drilled properly, however, it's almost impossible for the fracking to cause such a problem. Once the well is drilled to the proper depth, the fracking occurs horizontally, making it almost impossible to fracture the rock far enough upward to hit water. Most upward fractures aren't more than a few hundred feet.

There's no way in the world that we're fracking 6,000 feet of rock, Steinsberger said.

As for the flaming tap water, the documentary's director said in a TV interview he didn't determine its cause, merely that it happened in an area where gas wells were being drilled. Hutt said combustible water is more typically caused by a water well that's been drilled into a deposit of coal-bed methane, which tends to be closer to the surface.

Unfortunately, such mundane explanations increasingly are lost amid a widening controversy in which the middle ground is being lost to extremes of irrational fears and industry mule-headedness.

Loren Steffy is the Chronicle's business columnist. His commentary appears Sundays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Contact him at loren.steffy@chron.com. His blog is at http://blogs.chron.com/lorensteffy/.